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THE SOCIAL TRANSLATION OF THE GOSPEL *

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THERE is a mediaeval Italian painting which has long been a favorite of mine and of which copies hang in the studies of many men of my profession. It is a picture of St. Jerome translating the scriptures. The miscellaneous assortment of friendly beasts with which the artist has enlivened an otherwise quiet scene at first attracted my childish mind, but now that I have become a man I find the picture still attractive. It is more than an imaginative picture of an historic figure or an historic event or even of a single profession. It is symbolic, and it means something not merely to the student but also to the preacher and the layman.

For every Christian life taken seriously is a task of translation. Not only those who teach Greek and Hebrew, and students thumbing their dictionaries are translators; all teaching and preaching and living is a work of translation. The men who constructed our systems of theology have been rendering history and experience into a different language. The builders of cathedrals were translators of the gospel. The message of good news has been rendered into the plastic speech of character by Christian teachers, and, again, by the unknown, uncalendared saints of all ages and lands. And now for many years there has been a demand for another translation — the social translation of the gospel.

I need not dwell on the urgency of this demand. Before the war the study of the New Testament from the social standpoint

* An address delivered at the opening of Andover Theological Seminary and the Harvard Divinity School, September 27, 1921.

was one of the two principal new characteristics of the theological study of our generation. The events of the last decade have only intensified this interest. In a world desperately aware of failure and need there is pretty general agreement that the original message of Jesus offers the only cure. It is not only those most friendly to the church who accept the alternative "Christ or chaos." But the Christian church does accept it, and its best minds are engaged in the effort to discover what the social task of the church may be. It is not therefore as something new or as something requiring fresh emphasis that I choose my subject, but rather — at the risk of being trite — I select it as the leading religious question of the day.

What needs emphasis in my title is not the word 'social' but the word 'translation.' That eager expectancy of our age for a social gospel, that blind confidence that Christ can settle all our problems, is not to be discouraged; but it is important for us to realize, above all if we are to teach the Christian religion, that there is a process of translation required which is by no means simple or easy. And it is our business, the especial duty of academic students and teachers, to qualify ourselves for the work of translation. We are altogether too likely to be superficial in this — and superficiality leads to dogmatism. The Christian teacher is expected to know the Christian answer to social problems. Woe to him if he hastily skips the painstaking process of translation.

For we need to be reminded how far the gospel is from our own preconceived requirements. The teaching of Jesus as it is recorded for us in the oldest and most reliable strata of tradition was not primarily social teaching. Too much has recently been read into and out of such a phrase as 'the Kingdom of God' or the word 'Father.' It is doubtful whether wide implications for human society were in Jesus' mind when he used these terms. The gospels are strikingly lacking in much that has become most prominent in our thought and conscience. We miss in them, in the first place, explicit teaching on social institutions. Jesus takes these for granted, — slavery, monogamy, private property, taxation, and the rest. What his teaching involves with regard to these as moral or religious

problems cannot be discovered by merely citing a parable that mentions them or by the absence of specific judgments against them. Search the gospels through, and you will find only one definite social institution on which Jesus seems to pronounce judgment, and that is the restricted question of the re-marriage of divorced persons.

In the second place we miss in the gospels the definition of collective duty. One of the strangest transitions of recent years and one to which Christian preaching has very imperfectly adjusted itself — still less Christian liturgy and hymnody — is the new sense of corporate guilt and corporate duty. The gospels have much to say about sin and repentance for the individual on his own account, but recently personal sin has gone out of style. This is partly due to our natural dislike of unpleasant subjects and partly to a new and baffling sense of corporate responsibility in which the individual easily shirks his part. The Christian world is perhaps no less appalled now with the sense of failure than were the sin-sensitive Puritans of early New England. Certainly Christendom has reason to be aware of its failure, but the gospels do not directly express this kind of corporate guilt. In the old question, What shall I do to be saved? the pronoun has been changed to the plural, What shall *we* do to be saved? The old terminology of personal sin does not suit this religious experience, and it only too easily enables us to get out from under it, by assigning the guilt to others rather than to ourselves. The war, we know now, was not the private misdeed of any one of us; therefore, since personal sin is the only kind we recognize, we put the blame for it entirely on other people. It is true that in Paul's views of the heritage of sin from Adam, Scripture supplies after a sort a sense of solidarity in guilt, and in Satan offers a form of supra-personal wickedness; but neither of these doctrines exactly meets our need. We lack in the gospel that solidarity of guilt, and still more that solidarity in repentance, which is the only hope of a transformed world.

In the third place we miss in the gospel the social motive. Few Christians and even few scholars realize how totally absent from the Synoptic teaching is the appeal to the social motive.

Social acts are often commended, but the motive appealed to is never the need of the neighbor. Even the parable of the Good Samaritan — the classic of modern social ideals — really illustrates this. From the question, Who is my neighbor? Jesus turns to the question, Who acts as neighbor? He emphasizes the evils that fall upon the perpetrator of social wrong. The hater jeopardizes his own soul; the rich man can scarcely enter the kingdom; the censorious and unforgiving suffer a punishment in kind. Not once in his extant teaching does Jesus appeal to the rights of other men, the duties which they may legitimately expect of a Christian. Jesus seemed to be always interested in the subject of a social act, not in the person who was its object. He aimed not directly at a saved society but at a society of savers. Perhaps this is social motive enough, the *noblesse oblige* of a spontaneous Christian conscience. It is possible that we are too much afraid of the motives of reward and punishment and that we lay too much stress on a kind of sentimental altruism as the main-spring of correct social action. But whether for better or worse, the social motive of Jesus, with its apparent individualism, is not the motive we are used to; and it is well to realize that nearly every familiar form of social ideal is conspicuous by its absence from the gospels.

These three illustrations suffice to show how really the gospel of Jesus needs translation if it is to meet the demands of our day. It is not merely that our social problems are different problems, it is that our whole approach is from a different angle. Even were our angle the same, some translation would be needed. In spite of its lack of explicit commands, one feels that the teaching of Jesus has certain principles which are as applicable to the problems of our time as they were to his own. But if we wish to find them out accurately and not merely to accept as Jesus' principles the ready formulas made by other men, that are neither scriptural nor accurate, we must submit to the labor of study and translation.

Let me illustrate with a familiar parallel. In these days of educational superficiality and so-called vocational efficiency, theological seminaries feel the pressure from students for the abandonment of the required study of Greek and Hebrew. Many

men who hope to maintain their self-respect in the ministry are apparently willing to accept the current English translations of the Bible, without knowing a jot or a tittle of the original tongues. On the merits of that controversy I will not speak, but in the matter for which that is a parable, the social translation of the gospel, no educated minister dare evade a study of the underlying basis. He cannot accept second-hand the work of others; he must study the life and teaching of Jesus; he must keep himself constantly qualified to consult the original, and as far as possible must live in its atmosphere and spirit.

Stated in another way the gist of what I am saying is this: We believe that Jesus' attitude was to the problems of his time as the Christian's attitude should be to the problems of our time. But this is an algebraic proportion of four terms: $a : b = c : x$; and the unknown quantity we are seeking, namely, the true Christian's attitude today, can only be found if the other three terms are known.

So these three are the first objects of study; — the problems of Jesus' time, the attitude of Jesus to them, the problems of our time. Many who attempt to translate the gospel socially are satisfied to study the last of these three, but the other two factors, involving as they do research in ancient history and in the evangelic records, are at least equally important. To leave mathematics for linguistics and return to our metaphor of translation, they are the grammar and dictionary of the original language from which the translation is to be made. And every translator must know that original tongue. Those very modern preachers, who aim to be up to the minute with all the social theories and panaceas, current statistics and predigested propaganda, but have little thought for the problems of Jesus' day and the way he met them, are like one who in translating the Greek Testament into English, or into Hottentot, relies solely on his mastery of the modern language but bungles with the original.

This is not the place to describe that original language, — which is the study of Jesus' life and teaching. It is a very different idiom from our own; it smacks of the patois of Canaan.

It deals with publicans and sinners instead of Republicans and Democrats. One cannot find in the Sermon on the Mount either percentages of wool tariff or percentage of Americanism. But our interest is in these modern things, — in Boston, not in Bethsaida; in the American “legion,” not in its Gadarene namesake. It may be well, therefore, to indicate briefly some of the leading factors in the gospel that seem particularly to need social translation, or that seem likely when so translated to help us deal soundly with the perplexing questions of our day.

First, we need to realize the moral earnestness of Jesus. It is perhaps not superfluous to remind you that Jesus’ teaching deals not primarily with theology but with conduct. In contrast to the theologians who are called by his name, and unlike the picture they paint of him in their own image, Jesus’ mind dealt not with speculative but with moral questions. Both implicitly and explicitly he stands for moral values. The bulk of his teaching deals with character, and in so far as the earliest gospels involve an attitude toward or estimate of himself, that too is moral.

And this same contrast with much of the religious thought of the church also holds between Jesus and the religious thought of his own day. He taught with authority, and not as the scribes, and this impression, made upon his contemporaries, was due to the same moral earnestness. He was marked by a confidence that was not dogmatism, by a sureness of touch that was born of interest in right conduct and of insight into moral values. His authority was the self-evident truth of his position — and it is this authority as tested by men’s natural ability to “judge,” as he said, “even of themselves what is right,” that has given his moral teaching its extraordinary vitality so that after eighteen centuries it can influence men and win their respect.

This moral earnestness is revealed most strikingly in a negative way by the neutrality of Jesus. Not only is he happily silent on the many petty controversies of our day, but even to the issues of his own time he showed an independent, annoying, and even shocking indifference. To the burning ecclesias-

tical controversy on the legitimacy of Jerusalem or Gerizim as a place of worship, he is represented as giving a non-committal reply, which could be understood as 'both' or 'neither.' Similar appears to be his famous answer about tribute to Caesar. When it is a purely political matter—and therefore to the Zealots the most important issue—Jesus reminds them that their first duty is to God. Again when a matter of legal rights is raised, Jesus refuses to arbitrate—and yet how many people think law and rights are the essential factors of social salvation. No, in all these cases Jesus insists on the higher level and declines to debate or decide on the lower basis. Of course these questions involve moral issues, and much more obviously were the publicans and harlots, and the woman taken in adultery, suitable objects for moral decision. But with an independence of judgment that outraged both moral and social standards, Jesus appreciated the truer moral criterion.

I have spoken of this as the higher level, but from the viewpoint of character we must call it the deeper level. In questions of a man's right living the fundamental springs of character alone can be trusted. Jesus knew enough about whitewashed sepulchres and barren fig-trees to demand that men should give deeds as well as words—justice and mercy as well as tithes of garden vegetables, the second mile as well as the minimum of duty or compulsion. Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaketh. A change of heart is the only safe guarantee for the moral life.

Familiar as is to us the thoroughness of Jesus' ideal for a good life, we still scarcely recognize its revolutionary character, partly because it is so rarely illustrated in action and partly because it works in such unobtrusive ways. It explains, for example, a puzzle which I have already touched upon, the question why Jesus makes his approach to the individual rather than to the social system. The revolutionary dynamic in the truly converted man (and conversion is merely the religious euphemism for revolution) can move mountains or pull down the mighty from their seats and exalt those of low degree, and destroy and rebuild in three days the temples that forty and

six years have not completed. Those hard sayings in the Sermon on the Mount are neither oriental hyperboles to be explained away nor rules of casuistry to be literally observed. They are hints of the extraordinary effect on men's conduct when Jesus' revolutionary standards are set up and followed.

In the second place, it is of value for us today to realize that Jesus contributes to our social questions a distinctive method. One always finds it difficult to put his finger on the originality of Jesus. Our historians are only too eager to find that some rabbi or oriental sage or Greek philosopher anticipated Jesus in this point or that. But if there was anything original about his teaching it was in the matter of method rather than of aim. His aim was pure and lofty like that of many another, but his method was more perfectly fitted than theirs to that aim.

How many a worthy reform has failed through reliance on unworthy methods. The Jesuits are not the only ones who have yielded to the plea that the good end justifies the evil means. But Jesus, with a far-sightedness that our impatience finds it difficult to imitate, forged for his ends methods that were in harmony with them, and therefore he succeeded where others failed. The story of his temptation — a temptation to vindicate his divine vocation through material means, or through political means, or through showy advertising, is the graphic presentation of his victory over this subtle danger. He resolutely rejected as of Satan the adoption of evil means for good ends, and though it pointed to the way of the Cross, he felt bound to follow God's thoughts rather than men's.

But nothing more clearly reveals the uniqueness of Jesus' method, in comparison with that of other moral codes, both ancient and modern, than his attitude toward evil. No one will accuse Jesus of indifference toward, or compromise with, sin. His aim was as earnest as that of any reformer. His difference was in his treatment of sin's victims.

This method of Jesus in dealing with evil was, in a word, the overcoming of evil with good. Desiring as he did, not the punishment of wrong, nor the defence of right, as we use these terms, but the making right of him who is wrong, he exhibited a strange contrast with the methods of modern law, industry,

and politics. He was able to draw the line in both his teaching and conduct between rebuke and reviling, between judgment and censure. The present-day methods of dealing with evil Jesus habitually eschews. They are forms of *coercion*, by law, by violence, by external moral authority, by propaganda. Jesus relied on forms of *conversion*, by rebuke, by persuasion, by individual and inward conviction, and by love. Love still is the best expression of Jesus' chief social principle, though perhaps a less hackneyed word is reconciliation. His aim was to reconcile men to God, to each other, and to their lot in life. When two quarreling brothers asked him for justice in the settlement of an estate, he seems to be thinking of their reconciliation to each other by the expulsive power of an affection greater than love of money. There is never more hate between white and black in America, between Frenchman and German in Europe, than existed between Zealot and publican in Judea, but Jesus brought Levi the publican and Simon the Zealot to sit down at the same table. And Jesus won men to each other by first winning them to himself. One by one, slowly but irresistibly, he called men to himself; and they rose up and left all and followed him — the unstable Peter, the impetuous James and John, and many another who has not seen but yet has believed. In spite of their fifty theories of atonement, our theologians have never quite obscured the meaning of the cross as Jesus' great appeal to men. Having loved his own he loved them unto the end. Love was his only method. He had no second string to his bow. And in a sense by being lifted up he draws all men unto him.¹

Herein lies the basis of what was said about the thoroughness and the revolutionary effect of Jesus' teaching. This method, not of changing systems but of changing men, has well been called by the familiar term 'direct action.' Jesus aimed directly at the root of evil, the heart of men. He dealt, therefore, not with symptoms but with diseases. Compared with his method, our tinkering with the machinery of society, our coercion of unwilling masses, are but blundering and ineffective gestures. Without reconciliation between men, the evils of

¹ Compare Micklem, *The Galilean*, Chapters III, IV, V.

society will not be cured by political and economic expedients. The form of evil changes, but the evil nature crops out in another form. Slavery suppressed by force only makes way for the race problem. Militarism destroyed in one country by compulsion sows its seeds in other nations. Autocracy in government is succeeded by bolshevism or reappears in forms of industrial autocracy.

Whether Jesus was aware of the difference or not, he can at least teach our generation, if we listen to him, the real nature of our problems; and perhaps in our complex society we need more than anything else a deeper insight into our problems and an appreciation of the appropriate method for undertaking their solution. "People sometimes speak," says a modern writer,² "as if we could solve our international problems by some balancing of armies and navies, some satisfactory arrangements about tariffs and markets, some delimitation of frontiers. It is sometimes represented to us that we can solve our industrial problems by an adjustment of wages and hours and profits, and that the kingdom of heaven could be established on earth by a wise and eloquent law-giver. As well suggest that an unhappy and divided home can be healed by a more equitable division of the cake and an increased arm-chair service! Jesus enables us to see more deeply into things than that. For all these problems of politics and industry and economics are, in the last resort, problems of personal relationships; and there is no solution of them that is not in terms of personal reconciliation and understanding."

In speaking thus of the principles of Jesus, I have taken it for granted that they have some value today. Such an assumption should need no apology; perhaps it does need a word of explanation. I am not unmindful of the fact that there has been a disposition in the Christian world to give to this assumption — the validity of Jesus' ethics — much verbal assent and much virtual denial. I will not put all the blame for this habit of ignoring Jesus' teaching on the concentration of interest upon theological disputes — a phase that I trust is passing — though the new battle-ground of ethics does not promise any

² Micklem, *The Galilean*, p. 115.

easier conflict or any fewer dangers; yet theological orthodoxy certainly makes it easy for men to call Jesus, 'Lord, Lord' and do not the things that he says. The ethical sayings of Jesus are hard sayings, and still harder is the hardness of men's hearts.

I need not refer to the painful moratorium on Jesus' principles declared by Christian nations and many Christians during the war. Even before the war there was a tendency, and that in high theological circles, to evade Jesus' teaching and to evade it not merely in practice but even in theory. The excuse was the eschatology of Jesus, his expectation of the near end of the present age. And it excused us in two ways: either Jesus' teaching was intended for the millennium, giving counsels of perfection which need not be obeyed because the millennium has not yet come, or else his teaching was intended for the brief period supposed by him still to remain before his second coming, and so was not normal or even final, but merely *Interimsethik*.

Now there is little doubt that Jesus and his early followers did hold an expectation of a cataclysm at a near date, an expectation which subsequent events have not literally fulfilled. But I am not sure — and I think theologians are far less sure than they were in 1913 — that this confession invalidates the teaching of Jesus. Certainly they cannot criticize Jesus' ethics on both grounds at the same time. If it was for the interim only, it was not also for the millennium, and we need to protest against the loose thinking that wants to have it both ways at once. And besides, I am not sure that the expectation of a catastrophe necessarily spoils a man's ethics — whether for this age or for the age to come. This war has at least taught us to be a little more sympathetic with the apocalyptic mind. The theory of progress as a slow-moving development — a kind of escalator forever leading us upward — has been badly jolted. It might have been well if, instead of our modern evolutionary optimism, we had shared a little in the apocalyptic forethought and watchful anxiety of him who asked, "When the Son of Man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?"

I have said that you cannot reject on two contradictory grounds the teaching of Jesus. But you can accept it on two

contradictory grounds, and in a sense both statements made about Jesus' teaching are true; it was meant to be the standard for the future kingdom of God, but (and here is the point which more careful study of the eschatological problem is bringing out) he also intended his followers to live by those principles here and now. He had no illusion about the environment in which they would live. He did not expect the disciples to find life easier in this stubborn world than their master had found it, but he expected them, without waiting for its fuller realization, to be the kind of people of whom the kingdom of God consists. Other people may have other standards, but the Christian is to live as though for him the kingdom of God had come. That is the way Jesus lived, and that is perhaps the sense in which, notwithstanding his usual reference to it as future, he sometimes spoke of the kingdom as already here. It will never be realized in all men until it is realized in some men. To those who lived by its standards it could be said prophetically: The kingdom of God is within you. Its principles are equally valid at all times for those who, like Jesus, look at life *sub specie aeternitatis*. Ethically at least, wherever the battle between good and evil is joined, the kingdom of God has already "come before its time."

Such a standard of conduct will not escape the charge from so-called "practical" men of being utopian, but once more the war has sobered us a little in our criticisms of Jesus as an unpractical idealist. I am not impressed with the good results of the war, but undoubtedly one of its results is an enhanced appreciation of ideals as compared with grape-shot. Life guided by the standards of a better future seems, in the light of large-scale experiments in the reverse, more likely to bring that future than is an accommodation of Christian ethics to the standards of *Weltmacht*. In unexpected quarters men are urging that the principles of Jesus be practised now without waiting for the millennium. Perhaps no startling increase has been made to the number of those, who from the sheer attractiveness of Jesus' program, accept with insight and courage the challenge of the late Professor Rauschenbusch, Dare we be Christians? There are, however, many who out of mere fear for the material

and spiritual benefits of civilization grudgingly admit that we dare not be anything else. And, whatever the motive, we cannot regret that for divers reasons the good news of the kingdom is widely preached.

I have returned now to the thought with which I began — the demand for an application of Jesus' principles to the social problems of today. I have spoken of the moral earnestness of Jesus, his neutrality to controversial issues when an attempt was made to put them on a lower plane, his method of thoroughness and individual approach. I have emphasized the moral harmony between means and end, which in his life and teaching made the method as significant as the aim itself. I should like to have spoken of other features in his career, especially his position as a member of the minority and his martyrdom, and the social translation of these qualities in our age, when it is hard for respectable Christians to be effective minorities and martyrs. But I have said enough to indicate why the task of translating the gospel socially is one that is worthy of exceptional mental powers, exceptional moral earnestness, exceptional fidelity and honesty. Translation in the case of books in foreign languages too often means expurgation, paraphrase, — the watering down of the original to the effete or prudish tastes of our day. The social translation of the gospel must be accurate and unadulterated, true to the spirit of Jesus, and never shrinking to declare the whole counsel of God.

What that translation must be, how literally the original idiom can be reproduced, I have not attempted to declare. I have tried only to emphasize the importance of knowing that original thoroughly and to suggest a few characteristic elements of that idiom which must not be overlooked by any translator. The actual translation is the further task of trained students and teachers, "workmen that need not to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." As title to such a translation, over such a transmuting of the gospel of Jesus into a life of saintliness and perfect social adjustment, the devout Christian may write as a motto the quaint words from the title-page of our English Bible: "Translated out of the original tongues and with the former translations diligently compared and revised."